

## **I'd cheat destiny\_just to be near\_you** by **Luddleston**

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**Summary:**

Zack returns to Midgar. He has one major problem: he's been flirting with Cloud this entire time and Cloud has not noticed even once.

Cloud has one major problem, too: he's in love with Zack and completely certain that Zack has no interest in him.

Aerith is the only one who can save these clueless idiots from themselves.

## **I'd cheat destiny just to be near you**

### **Author's Note:**

In case you missed it in the tags, this fic is one giant spoiler-fest for the end of FFVIIR, aka the best thing that has happened to me in the history of video games.

Also, the initial title of this document was "ZACK LIVED, BITCH"

If Zack was completely honest, he'd admit that the Turks' helicopter landing a scant mile from his home had activated his fight or flight response like nothing else.

For good reason—the last time he'd seen a helicopter with that logo plastered across the side, he'd been faced with half Shinra's goddamn army descending on him. He'd made it out, barely, but the moment he walked away from that fight with Cloud pulled close to his side felt as though it was separated by inches from a reality where that was the end for him.

This time, the only person in the helicopter was Tseng, sweating and seemingly irritated with whatever forces had brought him there. If the Turks didn't care so much about uniforms, he'd have been fine, but wearing a black suit in the jungle was a terrible idea. Midgar got hot, but it didn't get humid the way Gongaga did.

If Zack was completely honest, the fact that it was only Tseng still made him want to run.

Zack didn't have to be completely honest though, because every other word Tseng said was a clever lie of omission. So instead, he said: "Why the hell do you think I'd go back to Midgar with you?"

Tseng gave him a laundry list of reasons. The president was dead and Rufus was in charge now, Zack was the last living First who wasn't a crazy person, they were looking for help to rebuild the city from literal ashes. Tseng knew none of that would work. Zack knew Tseng knew that, based on the

particular glint in his eyes when he added, "and we need to do something about Strife and the rest of Avalanche."

"Cloud?"

"That's correct."

Zack knew he was giving Tseng exactly what he wanted. That Cloud had been the ace up Rufus Shinra's sleeve, the final piece of bait in a trap meant specifically for Zack Fair.

And those lucky bastards were going to manage to catch him, weren't they.

— — —

Zack wasn't an idiot. He didn't get in the helicopter without proof from Tseng—security footage from Shinra HQ that clearly showed Cloud walking into the executive suite, with another couple of familiar faces to boot. Zack didn't know *how* Cloud had met Aerith, but wow, that was mind-bending.

But it didn't break Zack the way that Cloud directing his attention straight at the camera did, his Mako-colored eyes piercing even through the screen on Tseng's PHS. And then Cloud turned, walked away from the camera, and Zack's breath caught in his chest at the familiar sight of his sword slung across Cloud's back. The Buster Sword was unwieldy and impractical for someone of Cloud's build, but still, he carried it with him, carried a piece of *Zack* with him.

In the end, that (coupled with a reassurance that he wasn't going to have to go anywhere near the maniacs in lab coats) was what convinced Zack to hop in the helicopter and tell Tseng to floor it. Or, whatever the helicopter equivalent of flooring it was.

— — —

He knew he'd only gotten out of the Shinra building because the Turks had let him go. Without Rufus Shinra's approval, Zack wouldn't have gotten so

far as the front door, much less below the Plate. But there he was, eyes stinging as he faced the aftermath of Sector 7's downfall (what would have happened if he'd been there? Could he have helped?), heart racing as he stopped anyone who looked like they might know anything to ask after Cloud, Aerith, Tifa, *anyone*.

It was a kid in Sector 5 who eventually asked Zack what he was running for instead. He'd been beelining it for the church, if it was still standing, because Aerith hadn't been at the park and Zack had come to the unfortunate realization that he didn't actually know where she lived. The kid was grubby with scraped knees, like he'd been playing outside all day, and there was a sword made of two pieces of scrap wood nailed together attached to a piece of rope slung around his back. And there was the flower, a yellow lily in the kid's front shirt pocket. It was incongruous enough that Zack knew he was on the right path.

"I'm looking for Aerith," he said, and the kid eyed him suspiciously. Zack would've been offended, if he didn't look pretty damn suspicious, with his scarred face and his broadsword. He was dressed like a mercenary who'd just spent years in the jungle fighting monsters and marauders alike. That was exactly correct, but probably meant Zack wasn't the kind of person people would associate with the human sunbeam that was Aerith Gainsborough.

"Who are you?" the boy asked, squinting at Zack. "Are you another mercenary?"

*Another mercenary?*

"I'm... just an old friend of hers," Zack said, forcing himself to drop the tension from his shoulders and give the kid his most winning smile. "I'm Zack! I think Aerith can help me find someone I really care about, so I need to see her as soon as possible."

The suspicion did not dissipate. "I'm Oates," said the kid, "and who's she gonna help you find? I know everyone in this town. I can help you just as much as Aerith can."

Zack shook his head. "He's not from here. I knew him when I was in SOLDIER." Maybe not the best information to drop on an absolute stranger, but the absolute stranger was approximately ten, so Zack doubted he knew how to use that information against him.

"SOLDIER?" Oates asked, "I know someone else who was in SOLDIER. His name's Cloud."

How the actual hell Cloud knew some random kid from Sector 5, Zack has no idea. He wasn't asking, either. He didn't care.

"That's the one I'm looking for! Do you know where he is?"

"Yeah." A curt nod, and Oates turned and started weaving through the crowded marketplace, like Zack was only worth helping if he could keep up.

Well. That, Zack could do.

Oates led him across twisting back streets and through a tunnel that emptied out into a little courtyard in front of the largest singular building Zack had seen in Sector 5 thus far. The courtyard was full of long wooden tables and stools, garden boxes ringing the edges and the excited shouts of a half-dozen other kids playing.

Zack didn't really know where he was (some kind of school, maybe?) but he ignored that, because he was facing the back of a very familiar head. Cloud was still wearing his now-modified First-Class uniform, but he didn't have any weapons on him, probably because of the whole school thing. He was deep in conversation with a guy half-covered in bandages who was seated at the nearest table, with what looked like a map of Midgar spread out between them.

Good thing Zack had never given half a damn about interrupting important conversations.

He rushed Cloud from behind and nearly got a fist in the face for it, ducking out of the way at the last second with a, "hey, hey, Cloud, it's me!" He didn't

manage to miss Cloud's other elbow; apparently the guy had learned how to react to being jumped in the last few years. "Ow, what the heck!?"

"Zack?"

Cloud was startled into stillness, and remained that way long enough for Zack to finally make contact, pulling Cloud in and crushing him close. He counted how long it took Cloud to figure out what was happening: three seconds. Then, Cloud hugged him back with a sharp breath and a force that made Zack's heart race like he'd run all the way from Gongaga.

Zack remembered Cloud weak and stumbling, hardly able to hold his own head up, but clearly he'd made a full recovery. Cloud's fingers dug into Zack's shirt, curling around the edges of his shoulder blades, arms locked tight around him with the kind of strength that made Zack wonder why he'd ever questioned Cloud in a First-Class uniform.

He may have been stronger, but he was still just as short, his face pressed to Zack's shoulder and his hair tickling Zack's face. He just barely trembled under Zack's hands, like this moment was shaking his foundations. He thought maybe Cloud was crying. Zack sure as hell was.

"I wasn't sure it was real," Cloud said, muffled to near-inaudibility because he wouldn't lift his head to speak. Zack had absolutely no idea what he meant, but there'd be time for that. For now, he was going to hold on literally until someone pulled him away.

"Thought you were dead." Zack couldn't hide the way he choked up on that last word, but it was Cloud. And the small crowd of children and the man Cloud had been talking to, but whatever. Cloud was warm and solid and alive, and the pace of his heart matched Zack's and *god*, Zack could hold him forever.

Hardly anything could break through that moment, except maybe a pointed "*a-hem!*" in the distance that got Zack to lift his head enough to see Aerith standing there, looking so self-satisfied he'd believe her if she told him she'd orchestrated this entire thing.

"Don't I get a hug too?"

As if his heart could handle being any more overjoyed. "Of course! Get in here!"

He didn't exactly end up with the giant group hug of his dreams, because Cloud ducked out of his arms as soon as Aerith ran over, but she let Zack spin her around, laughing and patting him on the head as he set her back down. He wondered if Cloud would let Zack spin him around, too. Probably not. Cloud could probably spin *Zack* around.

There was still the ghost of a smile on Cloud's face, even though he'd shoved his hands in his pockets and wouldn't meet Zack's eyes again. He couldn't hide the flush on his cheeks or the twist in his lips, though, and Zack *wanted to kiss him*, and oh.

Oh.

Oh no.

— — —

Zack had run into Sector 5 and swept Cloud up into his arms and his *everything* approximately four hours ago, and Cloud's heart was still racing without any sign of slowing down. It felt like he was back on a stolen motorcycle, pushing the limits of the engine with Shinra's latest mechanical horror inches from his back tire. Given that he was just wandering around the gardens outside of Aerith's house, the adrenaline rush was incongruous. His hands were still shaking with it, but if he curled them into fists, he could ignore it.

They'd taken Zack back to the house (somehow he'd never been, even though he and Aerith used to date, Cloud didn't get it), and Zack, after proclaiming that he wanted to go swimming in the waterfall pool outside, immediately asked what he could do to help. The list was long; the rebuilding effort needed everyone it could get, hence why Cloud and the rest of their tiny Avalanche contingent weren't hot on Sephiroth's trail right now.

That, and they couldn't find Sephiroth, but whatever.

Cloud had silently left the house while Aerith was introducing Zack to her mom, which, if it hadn't been for Shinra and SOLDIER and, in another universe, Zack's untimely death, would have happened a lot sooner. Probably with Aerith calling him her boyfriend instead of "an old friend of mine and Cloud's" and with even more dangerous looks from Elmyra.

He was just about to cross the bridge and head back into town to see if Biggs needed anything else after their conversation had gotten cut off by the best thing that had happened to Cloud in years, when he heard the patter of familiar footsteps racing up behind him. This time, he didn't turn and attack, but Zack held back until Cloud nodded at him in acknowledgment. Probably smart.

"Where're you headed?" he asked Cloud, throwing an arm over his shoulders. Thankfully, Cloud didn't have his pauldron on, so there was nothing to stab Zack in the arm. He thought maybe he'd leave the armor off for a while. Zack did this a lot, and Cloud had forgotten how easy it was to lean into him.

Cloud carefully avoided putting his own arm around Zack, because although Aerith was nowhere in sight, he felt like he was encroaching when he held onto Zack this way. "I was gonna go back and see if Biggs needs anything."

"Oh, yeah! Kinda stole him from you, didn't I?" When Zack grinned at him like that, Cloud suddenly felt like he was back in his ill-fitting cadet's uniform, magnetically drawn in with the rush of his first real crush flooding his brain.

Turns out he maybe had not gotten over some things.

"I guess," he said, looking resolutely ahead. Zack squeezed the back of his neck before letting go. This was not helping Cloud's heart rate slow down. He flexed his fingers in his gloves again, less shaky now, but his palms had started sweating which was also no good.



"Mind if I tag along? Barret's trying to convince me to join Avalanche, and I don't know a polite way to tell him I don't really need the whole speech, I'm already down."

Cloud made the mistake of looking back up at him. Zack's eyes were brighter than the sunny sky above them, and Cloud felt like he'd been hit head-on with a Thunder spell. "Yeah." He wasn't really sure what he was agreeing too. Hadn't been paying enough attention. He was pretty sure that whatever Zack asked, though, he'd say yes.

— — —

Despite the initial suspicion Elmyra harbored to all handsome men who were close friends of her daughter's, she liked Zack. Cloud suspected this was because Zack immediately offered to help with dinner—feeding Wedge alone was a challenge, much less the rest of them. Zack was a surprisingly good cook, if a little haphazard about it, and Elmyra seemed to appreciate his assistance. When Cloud headed downstairs after a night of not being able to sleep because he couldn't stop looking at Zack curled up on the sleeping bag next to his, Zack was already in the kitchen, sorting through the cabinets. Half his hair was pulled back into a ponytail, so Cloud suspected Marlene was awake too.

"Mornin', sunshine," Zack said, without turning around.

"Aerith's still asleep," Cloud said, "it's just me." He swallowed—Zack was dressed in the well-worn tank top he'd been wearing as an undershirt yesterday, and whatever he'd been doing during the miraculous years of time Cloud had stolen from fate's grasp for him, he'd been keeping himself just as toned as he'd ever been.

Zack finally turned to face him, giving him a curious look before heading to the fridge. "No, I meant you. I knew it was you."

Oblivious as he came off, it was easy to forget that Zack's senses were just as sharp as any SOLDIER's. He must've heard Cloud's footsteps the way Cloud would recognize Zack's. "Oh. Well, that's probably the opposite of anything I'd ever expect anyone to nickname me."

"What, with your personality? C'mon." Zack leaned in to ruffle his hair and Cloud batted his hand away, faster than him for once.

"Gonna have to get used to you teasing me again," Cloud said. "The only person who ever tries that shit now is Tifa, and she's nice about it."

"I can be nice." The sharpness of his grin said he wasn't entirely being honest. "In fact, I'm being very nice right now, making breakfast for everybody. You wanna help, or are you just planning on sitting there looking pretty?"

"Can't do the second one, so yeah, I'll help."

Zack chuckled as he flipped through the recipe book that Elmyra had graciously allowed him to use, speaking like he was barely paying attention to the words that came out of his own mouth. "Nah, you're the prettiest person I know." If Zack knew he'd made Cloud's heart stop for a solid three seconds, he didn't acknowledge it. "Hey, how many pancakes do you think we'll need for everybody? Thirty?"

Cloud paused just a little too long before remembering that he had to answer.

"Probably more than that."

— — —

This usually worked.

In fact, based on past experiences, this *always* worked.

Why wasn't this working?

Granted, Zack was moving kind of fast with the whole thing. It'd taken all of fifteen minutes spent with Cloud for him to realize that he was into this guy, like *really* into him, and it'd taken a few hours longer for him to start flirting, and it felt *right*, so he kept going, and...

And Cloud had done exactly nothing about it. For three days.

Zack grumbled a frustrated series of non-words and scrubbed harder at a stubborn speck of monster blood clinging to the blade of his broadsword. Tifa was eyeing him cautiously from a few feet away; the two of them had just finished their half of an effort to get rid of a monster infestation on Steel Mountain, and were waiting near the weapons shop for Barret and Cloud to get back.

And then Zack would probably try to make a move on Cloud again and Cloud would ignore it, and Zack would be stuck wondering if this was all a worthless effort. Shit.

"You okay?" she asked, carefully not looking up from inspecting her gloves for damage.

"Yeah. Maybe. It's just..." Zack gave up on the sword for now, he'd need more than an already-dirty rag to get rid of the stains. "Is Cloud straight or something? Because, usually if I'm hitting on someone it works, unless they're not into dudes, so I was thinking maybe he's not into... yeah. Never mind. Don't answer that."

"He's not," she said slowly, tapping her chin as she thought. "He's just kind of... Oblivious."

"I've been *pretty* obvious about it." Yesterday, they had been up on the hill outside Aerith's house as night fell, watching the fireflies with her, and Zack had offered to share his jacket with Cloud, since it was big enough to keep both of them warm. Cloud just stood and left, telling the two of them to enjoy the rest of their night with an odd look on his face. "I think he's noticed, and he's just not into it."

"I can almost guarantee you he hasn't," Tifa said. "Listen. Jessie says they went into town a while back and ran into this SOLDIER, Roche, and he hit on Cloud for a solid hour or two, but Cloud had no idea what she meant when she joked about it later."

"Shit, that dude's still around? He's so weird."

"Mm. Yeah, not sad that I missed that." She tugged her gloves back on. "Oh! And when he was with Aerith in Wall Market, he danced with Andrea—ask Aerith about that sometime, Cloud'll never tell you—and the guy tried to kiss him, he was *this* close." Tifa demonstratively leaned in until her face was barely three inches from Zack's. "Cloud didn't even notice!"

"Wow, okay." This might be harder than he thought.

"Right?" Tifa grinned like she'd known this for years and had been waiting for somebody else to catch on.

"Guys?"

Zack and Tifa turned to find Cloud giving them a strange look, Barret tagging behind while adjusting something on his gun.

"Hey! We were wondering if something held you guys up," Tifa said.

"Yeah, something held us up! Goddamn wyvern tried to chew my arm off," Barret complained. "He went for the gun arm, but I'm thinkin' he threw off something with the calibration—little asshole."

"You looked like you were doing just fine without us, anyway," Cloud said, placing every word like he was traveling over unsteady ground. Zack felt a sudden urge to explain that Tifa had just been demonstrating how bad Cloud was at picking up hints, but that held the distinct possibility of making things worse.

He'd just have to drop a few more hints, then.

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Aerith's house had a charming little balcony off the top floor, and that was where Zack found Cloud brooding on his fifth day back in Midgar. They'd been running errands with Aerith, trying to prepare to journey back out of town, but at some point, Cloud had disappeared. Aerith, bless her, had told Zack she'd finish up and gave him a list of places Cloud might be.

The balcony was third on the list. Zack almost missed him, because Cloud was sitting against the wall of the house, just outside the door. He had a flower in one hand, a daisy that was missing a few petals, as though Cloud had started absent-mindedly plucking them before remembering that Aerith would probably chastise him for it.

Zack closed the door behind himself and took a seat against it. Cloud didn't look up, although he had to know Zack was there.

"You finished that up pretty fast," he said. "Where's Aerith?"

Zack shook his head. "She's still out. She told me to come after you, it just took me a minute to find you." He set a hand on Cloud's knee and Cloud tensed, teeth digging into his lower lip. "You alright?" Zack asked, patting him gently.

"I guess," Cloud sighed. He dropped the flower and it landed limply on the floor of the balcony. "It's just... they told you what happened, right? When we changed the past."

It'd been in the briefing. Zack hadn't thought about it much, couldn't wrap his mind around it. He took a breath of floral-scented air and sighed. "Yeah. Rufus says I died. I don't really... I can't really *believe* him, though."

"Can you believe me?" Cloud was finally looking at him. He was starting to get a few freckles on the bridge of his nose, and his lower lip had a red indentation where he'd been biting it. "I can still remember it. How the rain felt. What your eyes looked like when you..." He cut off the end of his sentence with an exasperated noise, shaking his head like he was trying to scatter the thoughts from his brain. "You saved my life, and they killed you for it."

"Sounds like Shinra," Zack agreed. "But that must mean you saved me in the end." He touched Cloud again, resting a hand on his shoulder, bare skin against skin. "I'm here now. I'm alive now."

Cloud laughed, but it was bitter and humorless, like it could've come out as a sob just as easily. He looked like a man who had mourned someone for

years, his shoulders tight and his eyes brimming with tears he'd already cried a dozen times. Zack knew that in Cloud's memories, he'd died in the worst way possible, and that the little part in him that occasionally mourned his alternate self's death was multiplied a hundred times in Cloud's eyes. Cloud laid his hand over Zack's, squeezing a little too tight.

"How long are you here for, though? How long can we stop fate for? What if... it happens again?" He looked away, staring off the edge of the balcony at the valley below them.

Zack tipped his head back against the wood of the doorframe, watching the sky, which had gone a little grey. "I can't really promise that won't happen." His hand slipped from Cloud's and he put his arm around Cloud's shoulders instead, pulling him close and feeling the tension drain from Cloud as he relaxed against Zack's body, letting himself give in.

"I know you can't." Cloud's shoulders moved as he took a deep breath, and then another, less shaky this time.

"But I can promise that I'll do anything I can to keep the world from taking me away from you again." It might've been empty words, but it was all he had. "Maybe neither of us died in this reality, but you still got taken away from me, and I shouldn't've let that happen."

"I can't even remember how," Cloud admitted. "But I know you, so you must have tried."

"Yeah." Zack wanted to kiss him for hours. Until someone came up here and tried to open the door and shoved it into Zack's shoulder. He was so warm, and so close, and Zack could just—

Cloud sat up, nodding toward the road leading into town. "Aerith's on her way back."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess we should go see if she managed to get everything."

Cloud was up and out the door so fast Zack couldn't have caught him if he tried, but he could still feel the warmth of him along his side. He rubbed his

fingers over the imaginary impression of Cloud's hand on his.

"I mean it," he said to Cloud's retreating back, too quietly for him to hear. "I'll do anything."

— — —

"You," Aerith said, jabbing a finger into the center of Cloud's chest, "are the most clueless person alive!"

"I... what?"

Cloud tried to think what he'd done to deserve this, and had whittled the list down to a whole seven occasions when Aerith continued. "Zack! Obviously! Have you really not noticed... you asked him if he was *going on a date with me* yesterday, Cloud."

He was still not entirely certain why he had been ambushed at the entrance to the tunnel to Sector 6, where he'd been going to get some time alone, but most of the things Aerith did never make much sense to him.

"Well. Yeah. I mean, you guys are... back together, right?"

Aerith actually stamped her foot when she shouted. "No!" She paced in a circle and then poked him again. "When I said we'd moved on, I meant that. I'm interested in someone else now. And *he's* spent the last week hitting on you constantly!"

"Aerith, he hasn't been—he's just teasing me. You don't know—"

Aerith didn't have her staff on her, but from the look on her face, Cloud was pretty sure he'd have been smacked upside the head with it if she had.

Because, yeah.

She knew. She probably knew Zack far better than Cloud ever had.

He cleared his throat, and it echoed down the tunnels. "I still don't think he's —"

"Cloud. Have you ever once thought anyone was hitting on you?"

"Uh. I don't think most people are really—"

"I asked you on a date a minute after meeting you!"

He was silent for a while, just in case she felt like cutting him off again as soon as he spoke. "You mean that wasn't a joke?"

"No! Ugh. Tifa almost didn't believe me when I told her Andrea Rhodea tried to kiss you and you didn't notice, you know."

Cloud crossed his arms. "Andrea didn't try to kiss me."

"Yes he did." Aerith didn't leave room for argument. "And Zack's trying to kiss you, too. So you need to either... do something, or tell him it's not happening." She took a step closer to him, and he found himself stepping back, until he actually had his back against the wall, cornered by the second most innocent-looking person in the world, only surpassed by Marlene. Being threatened by Aerith had been a ridiculous thought, right up until this moment, when the concrete was digging into his back and his mind desperately searched for escape attempts.

"I... I, uh..." *I want him. I want forever.*

"You better not break his heart, Cloud," Aerith said, leaning in, and Cloud had stared down a behemoth without feeling this kind of pressure.

"I wasn't going to?"

"Good!" Aerith went back to sunshine and flowers, grinning brightly at him.

"Aerith," Cloud began, and he almost stopped himself, but for once, he found himself unable to stay silent. Zack was rubbing off, apparently. "I love him." Cloud pressed his fingers to his lips—the confession had been dragged from his mouth like a tooth being pulled, painful and all at once.

Aerith stopped in her tracks, her mouth falling open.



"I can't tell him," Cloud said, "because if he... rejects me, or something, I'll. Just. I don't think I could handle that."

She smiled at him, patting him on the cheek, and his confusion with the whole thing doubled.

"Hmm." Aerith twirled on her heel, bouncing as she started back toward her place, Cloud following helplessly. "I guess I'll have to tell him not to break your heart, too."

— — —

Cloud was avoiding him, plain and simple. If Zack didn't know better, he'd think Cloud got scared off by the intensity of their most recent conversation—the one about Zack dying. Yeah. That seemed plausible.

But, thanks to Aerith, Zack did know better. "He's not like me," she'd said, re-tying the pink ribbon she still wore, the one he'd bought her way back when. "He won't just ask somebody on a date because they're cute. He's not stoic, he's shy."

Zack had never been shy a day in his life, so it took a bit more of her explaining to get it through his head. He still wasn't sure how solid her advice was. 'Just grab him and kiss him' sounded like something that wouldn't work on a guy like Cloud. It'd work for Aerith, who would be delighted to be swept off her feet (if the way she kept talking about how Tifa could definitely lift her was any indication), but Cloud might punch him in the jaw if Aerith was wrong about all this.

Zack decided his face could take it. He'd taken plenty of hits for much stupider reasons.

Cloud was rarely predictable, but lately he could be counted on to spend his evenings sitting out in one of Aerith's flower patches, watching the stars. He didn't like to come back into the house until everyone was already asleep. Zack had stayed awake until Cloud came back one night, and Cloud had just kicked off his boots and gone straight to bed, probably didn't like people seeing him sleep. He usually woke up before everyone, but Zack,

who was a chronic early riser, had thrown that off. Zack had seen Cloud unconscious for distressingly long periods of time, though, so he figured he was alright with Zack being an exception.

Aerith's garden was always lit up at night. Zack couldn't remember seeing a lot of fireflies anywhere else in Midgar, but they were everywhere here. Marlene liked to catch them and peer between her fingers to watch them glow, depositing them into jars with holes cut into the lids for makeshift lanterns. She'd had to let them all go this morning, though, and so the insects were flying around freely, making the waterfall sparkle and enchanting the garden. Among them, Cloud looked too ethereally beautiful to be human. Zack had to put most of his mental effort into not running to Cloud.

He noticed Zack approaching before most people would have, his head lifting, firefly-lights reflected in his eyes. Zack didn't think anything would've been able to make those eyes more beautiful, but he'd been so, so wrong.

"Hey." Cloud grinned at him, eyes cast downward, lashes spreading shadows across his cheeks.

Zack was probably supposed to be saying something, but for once in his entire life, he couldn't come up with the words. Cloud was so gorgeous, it should have been illegal.

"Do you want to come over here?" Cloud said, each word measured. He was still treading carefully. Zack was grateful for the tact in the moment, but he wished, in a part of himself beyond this space in time, that Cloud would never have to be careful around him.

"This garden's beautiful at night," Zack said, taking a seat next to Cloud, close enough that their shoulders brushed. "Especially with you in it," he added, despite his attempts to, y'know, have a normal conversation to start with.

"Cut that out," Cloud said, nudging his shoulder against Zack's in what would have been playful admonishment if Cloud hadn't continued to lean

against him. "Can't handle all this flirting."

"Do you want me to stop?" Zack was careful, too. But Cloud's hand rested on his knee, and Zack couldn't help but mirror his position, their knuckles bumping together.

"I don't know," Cloud said, his voice soft and far away. "Sometimes I worry that's all this is for you. The flirting, playing around."

"Well, thank god you've finally realized I'm trying to flirt with you." Zack shifted his hand to take Cloud's, his thumb tracing over the seam in Cloud's gloves. "I'm not playing around, though."

"No?"

"No."

Cloud caught his eyes for a second, a challenge written clear in them. *Do something about it.*

It wasn't 'now or never,' Zack thought, because there'd be another chance. He wasn't letting Cloud go anytime soon. But it *was* 'now, please, do something before this explodes.'

"I'm gonna kiss you," he said, so quietly that if Cloud hadn't nodded just that tiny fraction, Zack would've been afraid he hadn't heard.

Cloud leaned into it with purpose, his hand slipping from Zack's to grab his bicep instead, his grip reminding Zack of the way Cloud had hugged him when they'd first met again. Like he *had* to keep Zack close.

It was one of those moments that Zack thought might never end, but unlike his previous experiences with those kinds of endless stretches of time, he didn't *want* this one to end. Cloud's hand slid up his shoulder to his jaw, his thumb stroking over the cross-shaped scar on Zack's cheek, and Zack held onto Cloud's waist, perfectly content to never speak another word in his life if it meant kissing Cloud forever.

That, like a good fifty percent of Zack's thoughts, was ridiculous, and eventually Cloud wasn't kissing him anymore. Zack's world was tilting sideways, and that, he realized at the least second, was because Cloud had pulled him over. At some point between the last time Zack had seen him and now, Cloud had become capable of tumbling someone approximately (exactly) Zack-sized onto the ground and pinning them there. Hopefully Zack didn't squish any of the flowers too bad, or he'd owe Aerith until the end of his days.

Zack was a match for Cloud, though, and he pulled him in, one hand on the back of his neck, until he could reach Cloud's mouth again. The night air had turned chilly and Zack hadn't thought to bring a jacket, a part of him having forgotten that he wasn't in Gongaga anymore and the weather wasn't dependably boiling. Cloud was doing a damn good job at keeping him warm, though, his hands and his mouth searing, the way he took Zack's hand and pinned it above his head making his blood run hot.

Everything smelled like petals and earth, and the grass below them tickled the small of Zack's back where his shirt had ridden up, but he couldn't really give a shit about that when he could lean up and run a hand down Cloud's side to his thigh instead. He tugged enough to encourage Cloud to straddle him instead of kneeling awkwardly on his left side, and Cloud pushed at his shoulders until Zack was flat on his back again, stealing a would-be confession off his lips.

Cloud was good at this, and Zack wanted to know how, not out of any jealousy but just because he wanted to know *everything*. There'd be time for that when Zack wasn't thanking the heavens that Cloud had forgone the usual array of belts that went with his modified uniform situation, and that meant Zack could slip his hands under Cloud's shirt. He'd gained even more muscle than his slight build let on, and Zack knew he made *some* kind of noise, because Cloud chuckled against his mouth and petted his hair, muttering "you good?"

"Yeah." Zack dipped his head to kiss Cloud's neck in the small space between his high collar and his jawline. "Can you take off your gloves?"

Both of them usually wore them—if you fought with a sword that heavy without a good pair of gloves you'd blister your hands in hours, not to mention all the impromptu climbing and rappelling and whatever else they ended up doing. Zack's were sitting atop a neat pile with the rest of the armor that he didn't feel he needed when they were just running errands around Sector 5, but Cloud wore his like he forgot they were on.

Cloud sat back so that he didn't have to use his hands to prop himself up and lifted his hand to his face to catch the tip of his forefinger between his teeth and jerk the glove off his right hand, then his left. Sure, it was perfunctory enough that Zack was certain this was what Cloud always did, but it was also *unbelievably hot*.

"Fuck, can you do that with my underwear, too?"

"What?" Cloud laughed, suddenly awkward. Zack cursed his lack of any filter between his brain and his mouth.

"Never mind. That was stupid. Agh. I'm sorry."

Cloud continued to laugh, tipping forward until his forehead was pressed against Zack's. "You're a dork."

"So I've been told."

"I like it." Cloud kissed him again, slower, one hand combing through his hair again. Zack pressed against Cloud's lower back, urging him closer, and Cloud settled more fully against him, letting all his weight rest on top of Zack, pressing him back into cool earth.

Zack had never felt so at ease with somebody new, had never trusted someone to take the lead like this. Cloud, he knew, would stop Zack if he went too far, and while the guy couldn't read between the lines of a conversation to save his life, he could anticipate what Zack was into with eerie accuracy. Maybe Cloud was just into the same things.

"Would you call me crazy," Cloud asked after minutes, maybe hours, maybe days, "if I said I loved you?"

"If I said I loved you too, would you stay out here with me all night?" Zack traced Cloud's lower lip with his thumb, his path broken when Cloud snorted with laughter.

"What the hell would we do all night?"

"I could think of an idea or ten," Zack said, even though half of them would be impossible. He squeezed at Cloud's waist, somehow the only part of him that was still as slim as he'd always been.

"Is one of them 'get mosquito bites in unfortunate places'?" Cloud asked, "because that's what's going to happen."

"Quit being practical while I'm trying to be romantic." Zack kissed at the underside of his jaw, hands sliding lower, thumbs tracing the sharp edges of Cloud's hipbones.

"Quit being romantic while I'm trying to be practical," Cloud countered, his voice too breathy to be entirely practical. "Shit. This wouldn't be a problem if my apartment wasn't buried under six feet of rubble and half a building."

"You have an apartment?"

"Had one. With a bed and everything." Cloud, it seemed, had discovered the spot on Zack's neck best known for making him lose his entire goddamn mind.

"Mmm. Sounds sexy."

"Yeah. I mean, not really. It's in Sector 7. And it wasn't sexy even before the plate fell on it."

"Well, I'm sure it had a bed that doesn't have Wedge in it and a wall that you didn't share with Marlene."

"It did have those, yeah—*ah*." Cloud's fingers curled involuntarily and he tugged at Zack's hair for just a second before letting him go, lifting his head so that he could meet Zack's lips again, messier and hotter than before,

rocking his hips against Zack's just as he pulled away. Zack swore the noise he made echoed through the whole valley.

"You're gonna drive me crazy," Zack said, "I mean, doesn't help that I've been thinking about it all week."

"Thinking about what?" It could've been an innocent question if Cloud wasn't still grinding against him in a way that wasn't innocent at all. He was so *deliberate* about it, no surprises there, Cloud never did anything by accident.

"Well," Zack said, because he was nothing if not willing to share his thoughts, "you've gotten a lot stronger since the last time I saw you." He squeezed Cloud's bicep as punctuation. "I've just been thinking about how you'd definitely be able to push me around now."

"You're into that?" Cloud's mouth was back on Zack's neck again, and he'd started using his teeth, too. Zack's tan was dark enough that he wouldn't show a ton of marks, but if Cloud kept going, it'd definitely be obvious.

And Zack didn't give a single fuck.

"Yeah, I'm into that," he said, "hard to come by, of course. Not a lot of people out there who could get away with holding me down."

That got a smirk out of Cloud, and more importantly, got Cloud to take both of Zack's wrists and pin him again, trapping his body against Cloud's—possibly the best place in the world to be. Zack lifted his knees, squeezing Cloud's hips between his thighs, rolling up into him and watching Cloud's face break into open, undeniable pleasure.

Holy shit, Zack wanted that burned into his brain forever. Cloud wasn't an expressive person most of the time, unreadable to anybody who didn't know him well, but apparently that did *not* extend to the bedroom. The proverbial bedroom, at least.

"Zack," Cloud sighed, "you can't—I mean—"

"I know, I know." Forget squishing the flowers, if Zack *fucked* somebody in Aerith's flowerbed, she'd just straight up murder him. He kissed Cloud again, gentler this time, stroking at the nape of his neck. All of him was aching to pull Cloud close again, to kiss every inch of him, his skin tingling with anticipation. "Besides," he added, kissing Cloud's cheek, "I'm a good guy, I don't put out on the first date."

Cloud sat up, rolling off of Zack in one smooth motion until they were seated side by side again, just like they'd been when Zack was still trying to figure out how to do any of this. Cloud shoved at his shoulder playfully, and Zack ruffled his hair in retaliation. "I bet you totally do," Cloud said. "If Aerith's place had another spare room, you'd totally sleep with me."

"Agh. You got my number, Spike."

"If you go back to calling me that, I'm going to break up with you," Cloud threatened, and Zack leaned in to kiss him again, because he could.

"You don't mean that," he said, with complete certainty.

Because Cloud was looking at him like he'd get in a dozen more fights with destiny, fate, and whatever else tried to keep the two of them apart before he'd let Zack get away from him again. And this time, Zack would be right there to have his back.

"Not really."

"Ha, knew it."

"But seriously, don't call me that. I'm your boyfriend, I'm sure you can think of something better." He stood, extending a hand to Zack to pull him to his feet, too.

Zack put his arm around Cloud, letting his hand rest on Cloud's waist instead of his shoulder. "Sure can, pumpkin."

"No."

"Cupcake?"



"No food." Cloud laid a hand on Zack's back despite his apparent annoyance. "That's weird."

Zack turned to kiss Cloud's temple. "Angel?"

"Getting worse." Cloud tipped his head up to kiss Zack, too.

"Guess I'll have to stick with 'Sunshine', then."

"That one's okay."

**Author's Note:**

I MEAN Y'ALL HAD TO KNOW I WOULD BE COMING IN WITH THIS KINDA SHIT. I love Zack Fair more than words can express.

Also, yell with me about Zack on twitter/tumblr @luddlestons